

**D**UNDEE'S Kill Your Timid Notion festival prides itself on offering unique experiences, things that refuse to fit easily into the old, familiar categories of film, music, art or theatre. For anyone in search of something different from the norm, it's an annual treat, and full of surprises. For anyone trying to describe it in writing, though, it's a bit of a nightmare. What is KYTN? You have to see it for yourself.

One of the highlights of last year's KYTN, for example, was a short performance in which a man called Guy Sherwin slowly rotated a hand-held mirror, while standing directly in front of a film projection of himself doing the same thing 32 years earlier, only in a forest. As Sherwin's face morphed from young to old and back again, what emerged was a poignant, dreamlike performance about ageing. It was ingenious, and greeted with whoops, cheers and applause from the audience, but what was it? Theatre? Art? A magic trick? Time travel? Whatever it was, the rest of KYTN wasn't really anything like it – if it had been, it would defeat the point, which is to go with an open mind and be surprised.

This year's KYTN is even harder to get your head around. Not only will the audience not know what's going to happen, but the Edinburgh couple who organise the festival, Barry Esson and Bryony McIntyre, also don't know. "In previous years we've been very interested in audience experiences," says McIntyre. "It's been very difficult for us to articulate to people what it is that you're going to experience, even when, actually, it's been a quite standard musical or film performance. So we've kind of taken that one step further."

This year, instead of programming performances, Esson and McIntyre have invited artists

and performers they trust to explore "open-ended proposals". The audience can help shape these proposals, if they like, by joining free "investigation groups" which will take place throughout this week – participate enough and you get into the festival for free too.

"Sculptures and films and performances are just outcomes of an artistic process," explains Esson. "We're more interested in going through a process and having other people involved in that process. It's terrifying because I don't know what's going to happen."

"It may fail on lots of people's traditional ideas of what a performance might be or what a festival might be, but it may well succeed in lots of ways that we couldn't imagine before."

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To help, Esson and McIntyre have invited guests whose work involves challenging these traditional ideas. Mattin, for example, is a Basque musician who has been known to sit in silence for an entire show, or berate his audience for their conservatism instead of performing to them, in order to question assumptions about what a "performance" is. The festival's film programme, meanwhile, is all about questioning the conventions of filmmaking.

"I think we get hung up on the idea that art should be entertaining," says Esson. "Entertainment presupposes an acceptance of the situation you're in. One of the great tools of art is to

**Taking the mic: Barry Esson and Bryony McIntyre get down on the street to challenge conventional notions of performance art.** Photograph: Phil Wilkinson

imagine different possibilities. We're interested in prodding away at things that can still be fun and accessible but which can be challenging, that question what is it you're coming to see.'

If KYTN can get away with this, it'll be testament to Esson and McIntyre's infectious energy and passion for what they do. Their festival can be challenging – *Britain's Got Talent* it is not, in case you hadn't realised by now – but it goes out of its way to be friendly, welcoming and unthreatening to newcomers.

Before each performance, Esson offers little pep talks to the audience, suggesting where to get the best view, or things to look out for (he would make a good schoolteacher), while McIntyre hovers nearby, making sure everyone is okay.

In conversation, Esson will often get swept away by his own enthusiasm, bounding off on entertaining ten-minute tangents that take in philosophy, the Enlightenment, the US constitution and avant-garde music. If people return to KYTN year after year, it says a lot about the trust audiences invest in both of them.

That said, even Esson wonders if they may be pushing it this time.

"I'm totally ready to get pelters from large parts of the audience," he says. "A lot of it might seem simplistic, or antagonistic. But that," he concludes with a big grin, "is exciting." ♦

**ANDREW EATON**

Kill Your Timid Notion is at Dundee Contemporary Arts, today until 28 February

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